

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Living Together
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August 16, 2020

Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 23:32-34

I want to begin with two incidents that occurred over the last week or so. The first concerns a 72 year-old disabled vet. He was staying at a motel when he noticed a young woman and her boyfriend enter without masks. As the couple passed by, the vet spoke to the woman reminding her that state and local ordinances required that masks be worn indoors. The couple passed on by without incident. Later though, the boyfriend returned, spoke to the vet and then proceeded to attack the vet, hitting him so hard that he broke the older man's jaw and rendered him unconscious. The second story took place in a Utah Walmart, where a woman was shopping without a mask. Another shopper, with a mask, confronted her. The maskless woman explained that she could not wear the mask because of a medical condition. In response the outraged mask-wearing shopper, grabbed the maskless shopper and threw her to the ground, injuring her. I wish I could say that these are isolated incidents, but they aren't. Just google "mask violence" and it will return thousands of results. My question for this morning is, how did we get here? And I will guarantee that most of you will immediately have an answer. But what I want to offer to you, is that we have come to this point in our national life because we have followed the fivefold path of dehumanization.

What is the fivefold path of dehumanization? It is the path that human beings have been following for as long as there have been human beings that lead people from peace to violence. Here is how it works. The path begins with a precipitating event. This event can be a war, a plague, a drought or any other life changing societal event. The path continues with this event creating, what Bowen Systems Theory calls, free-floating anxiety. This is anxiety that ripples through society, unnerving both individuals and the community. Next comes blame. If there is free-floating anxiety, there must be someone to blame. Someone is at fault. That someone can be a leader, or more often, those on the edge of society; the marginalized. Once someone has been found to blame, the path moves toward separation. If it is "those people" who are to blame then we need to separate ourselves from them, so that we are not contaminated by their presence. Finally, the path leads us to the conclusion that those "separated" people are not fully human, and therefore are deserving of violence and punishment.

If you want to see how this works in the Bible, consider the Hebrews in Egypt. The precipitating event is the rapid growth of the Hebrew people. Anxiety arises among the Egyptians because they fear being outnumbered. There is blame when the Egyptians, rather than seeing this growth as a blessing on the Hebrews by their God, see the Hebrew population growth as an attack upon the nation. There is separation when the Hebrew people are made slaves. Finally, there is violence when Pharaoh orders all the Hebrew male children to be killed. We can also see the fivefold path of dehumanization in the first Roman persecution of Christians which happened when Rome burned, people became anxious, the Christians were blamed, then rounded up and finally killed in the arena. If you want to see how this has operated in the United States, we can see it clearly in the internment of persons of Japanese heritage after

Pearl Harbor and the attacks on Muslims following 9/11. The question before us as followers of Jesus is, how ought we to respond to this process of dehumanization?

The answer Paul offers us is that rather than **dehumanizing**, we are to **rehumanize**. We are to work toward moving ourselves and others off the fivefold path of dehumanization and on to a different path; on to the **five-fold path for rehumanizing** those around us. Here is Paul's fivefold path for rehumanization.

First we shower blessings. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them," Paul writes. By this Paul means that our first response is to treat those who have dehumanized us, or whom we have dehumanized, as full children of God, by blessing them; by blessing them in whatever fashion we choose, meaning such things as acts of compassion, offering kind words and showing patience among them. When we offer these blessings we are saying that these people are worthy of God's love and grace. In this way those we have dehumanized become human to us again.

Second, we share space. "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another." It has been said that until we share laughter and sorrow with another then we are not connected. We are merely strangers. Part of the task before us then, is to be present with those whom we have dehumanized, or have dehumanized us, so that we can experience the joys and pains of life together. In this way those we have dehumanized become human to us again.

Third, we are to show humility. "Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are." Part of dehumanizing others is when we believe that we alone hold the truth and the other does not. By so doing we not only break fellowship with others but we see them as less worthy, as lesser beings who don't possess our superior knowledge. By showing humility we open ourselves to entering a truly human relationship with another. In this way those we have dehumanized become human to us again.

Fourth, we are to stop all violence. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all...beloved never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God." Violence is never acceptable because it robs people of their humanity. Violence states that the person attacked is not worthy of life, or existence, and therefore is not fully human, and so we eschew violence. In this way those we have dehumanized become human to us again.

Fifth, sow love. "If your enemy is hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing so you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not overcome evil with evil but overcome evil with good." As I said in another sermon recently, to heap burning coals is a sacrificial gift of heat and warmth. It is a gift of love. Our calling is to sow love, meaning to cast it to all, whether they have dehumanized us, or we have dehumanized them. One way to see love is as spiritual weed-and-feed. Love feeds the good spiritual lawn and destroys the evil weeds around us. So we are to cast our love to the world. In this way those we have dehumanized become human to us again.

What does this five-fold path look like? It looks like the life of Jesus. Jesus showered the world with blessings by healing people physically, mentally and spiritually. And he healed all people, not just those who liked him. Jesus shared space. One of the great accusations about Jesus was that he ate with sinners, tax-collectors and all the wrong kinds of people...including those whom his society had dehumanized. Jesus showed humility. He never demanded the greatest position for himself and was always willing to debate those who disagreed with his interpretation of God's will. He was non-violent. His movement was one of non-violence. It was one of healing and not destroying. Finally, he sowed love. he sowed love for men, women and children; for rich and poor; for Romans and Jews. By going to the cross he sowed love for all the world...and especially for those who crucified him; who saw him as less than human. He sowed love in their lives by asking God to forgive them. This is what the five-fold path of **rehumanization** looks like.

Before I finish, I want to add one caveat to this fivefold path, which is that this plan is not intended to put anyone in physical or psychological danger. I know that Jesus went to the cross, but this is not what he or Paul are asking of us. Paul puts it this way, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." By adding, if it is possible, Paul admits that there are times when this rehumanizing process may not work; that there are times when following the plan might lead to our becoming victims of violence. This is not Paul's intent. This is not Jesus' intent. Even so, our task is clear. We are to be rehumanizing agents in the world.

My challenge for you for this week is this, to ask ourselves, how am I rehumanizing those whom I have dehumanized and who have dehumanized me?